Our Turn in the Spotlight

by Ltjg. Stan Fisher

It was a standard surface surveillance flight (SSC) during our composite-task-unit exercise. Cutlass 476, our detachment's SH-60B, was to launch, radar floodlight the area, and visually identify all contacts with our forward-looking infrared system (FLIR). The crew aboard this day-into-night flight was composed of the most junior sensor operator (SO), most junior HAC, and myself, the most junior H2P on the det.

After being airborne for a half-hour, we painted a few contacts about 70 miles north. Back in combat, the tactical action officer (TAO) asked us to go out and take a look. The contacts were suspected to be part of the opposing force in the exercise; our last intel brief had them located somewhere far to the north.

Our crew, ever wanting to be the heroes, rogered up to the call and bustered outbound. We discussed slowing down to conserve some fuel, but it was only going to be a 3-hour bag and we launched with 3+45 to splash.

After finding the contact, we dropped out of range for voice-data link communications with the ship for about 15 minutes in order to get lower and have a closer look. We got visual identification and confirmed that it was an opposing-force ship. The situation had just become very interesting. Was the TAO going to pass orders to shoot? Would we get the first confirmed kill of the exercise? We weren't thinking about our burn rate and distance from the ship. Unfortunately, she was speeding away from us.

We had an hour to go until flight quarters, but we had strayed 100 miles from the ship. Instructions were not to fire, just localize. We picked up some simulated hostile emitters that were even farther to the north and checked in with the TAO as to whether or not they wanted us to investigate. He rogered up, and again we took off like a bat out of hell, thinking it might be our only chance. We coordinated a geographic point where we would reestablish comms with the ship, but we misjudged our ingress and egress time. After about 30 minutes of searching, we decided it was time to call it quits. We were still detecting hits from the opposing-force radar on our electronic support measures (ESM) system, but the contact must have been quite a ways off.

By the time we regained comms with the ship, we'd spent nearly 45 minutes with no radio communication (our SOP says that 30 minutes should be the maximum). We had now closed to 90 miles from the ship, but flight quarters was to be set shortly. As an aircrew, we had neglected to go through the usual checks and balances of time and fuel. Had we been paying attention to the timing of flight quarters, we would have questioned the order to investigate the second contact and more than likely cancelled it. The real reason for our now serious situation was a simple case of poor situational awareness. We weren't at war. The crew had been sucked into the simulated tactical picture and neglected the big picture.

As we headed home, minimum fuel reared its nasty head. We were staring at an impending low-fuel light if we continued in the same

configuration. After consulting NATOPS, we configured the aircraft in a max-range profile, which included jettisoning all sonobuoys, gaining altitude, and shutting down one engine to conserve fuel. Upon reaching 6,000 feet (recommended altitude per NATOPS in this situation), we shut down the No. 2 engine. I watched the torque and airspeed, meticulously trying to match the numbers in NATOPS. I also was staring at a big, red, No. 2 engine-out light, and I was not in the simulator.

We gauged our burn rate and closure rate to the ship, and things still did not look good. The ship understood the severity of the situation, changed course, and proceeded to close our position at flank speed. Talk about being in the spotlight!

There were numerous contacts between the ship and us, but some lacked a deck and the others weren't clear. Land was another 100 miles away. It was the ship or the water. Fortunately, we began to "make" some fuel and sighted the ship at about 10 miles with 600 pounds left. On final, we started up the auxiliary power unit and then the No. 2 engine. Oil pressure was a little high on start up, but eventually settled after we brought the power control lever to idle and then ran it back up.

I landed the aircraft with all systems intact, a lot lighter than on takeoff, an empty sonobuoy launcher, and a low-fuel light on No. 2. We touched down with 520 pounds of fuel; SOP stipulates no less than 600 pounds on deck. We had only missed it by 80 pounds, but we would have been very wet had we not singled up to one engine when we did.

Lessons learned? Always calculate your burn rate, your distance from home plate, and your time left on station. Most of all, know when to say when.

Ltjg. Fisher flies with HSL-46.